

Basic Detail Report



00047717

Title

Gas mask issued to child evacuee

Date

1939-1945

Medium

Rubber, plastic, metal

Dimensions

Overall (laid flat): 185 x 125 x 100 mm

Name

Gas mask

History

In 1938, fearing that the gassing of troops during World War II would be extended to the civilian population, the British Government issued 44 million rubber gas masks to every citizen over the age of five. As the war progressed masks were provided to toddlers and infants. Children's masks were manufactured in bright colours to make them

fun and to reduce the fear associated with wearing them. Masks were stored in small cardboard or leather boxes and had to be carried everywhere in the event of a poison gas attack. In May 1940 the threat of a German air attack on Britain increased, as did the likelihood of invasion. Commonwealth governments forwarded offers to house British children in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, and an interdepartmental committee was established in June to coordinate these offers. Known as the Children's Overseas Reception Board (CORB), the committee's terms of reference were 'to consider offers from overseas to house and care for children, whether accompanied, from the European war zone, residing in Great Britain, including children orphaned by the war and to make recommendations thereon.' Children would be placed with relatives living in the Dominions or in foster homes. Unlike the British child migration schemes of the 20th century, CORB children were only removed temporarily and would return home at the end of the war. The CORB evacuated a total of 2,664 children over a three month period. Canada accepted the bulk of evacuees, receiving 1,532 children in nine parties. Australia received 577 children in three parties, New Zealand 202 children in two parties and South Africa 353 children in two parties. A further 24,000 children had been approved to sail before disaster struck on 17 September 1940, when SS CITY OF BENARES - carrying 197 passengers including 90 children - was torpedoed and sunk in the Atlantic Ocean en route from Liverpool to Canada. With 77 CORB children amongst the 134 passengers killed, the overseas evacuation scheme was declared too risky and abandoned. John Hare, aged seven, was

evacuated with his three older sisters in the first Australian party in August 1940. He writes, 'we were not allowed to tell anyone where we were going ... we dressed in new clothes and packed all the others in our new suitcases; then, with our gas masks tucked under our arms, we left home for the train' (John Hare, *Evacuee*, Robjon Partners, Point Lonsdale, 2002, 13). John and his sisters travelled from London to Liverpool, where they boarded the Polish ship MV BATTERY for the 10-week voyage to Australia. After disembarking in Melbourne, John was separated from his sisters and sent to a foster home in Hampton - the first of nine homes he would live in during his five years in Australia. When the war ended, John and his sisters returned to England on RMS AQUITANIA, arriving in Southampton in January 1946. Looking back, John writes: When I arrived in Australia in October 1940 I was an undernourished, skinny kid, scared almost out of my wits, developing bed-wetting habits that were to dominate my life for several years. Here I was now, a confident youngster of thirteen with a distinctive Australian accent, completely over my bed-wetting days. We had all changed considerably in those five years and more, and we wondered whether our parents would recognise these four healthy, suntanned young people when we eventually returned home (Hare 2002: 64). Although happy to be back with his family, John longed to return to Australia. He fulfilled this wish in July 1949 when he migrated on SS ASTURIAS - sponsored by his war time guardians in Victoria. John got a job at the State Savings Bank of Victoria in Eaglehawk, near Bendigo, two months after arriving in Australia. He worked his way up to Manager of the Geelong branch before retiring in 1988. John was involved in boxing and was appointed Australian coach for the 1970 Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh. He ran the CORB reunion group in Australia for 50 years. John says, 'My best decision was to migrate in 1949 despite any other family members joining me. I married an Aussie girl, we had two daughters and now have six grandchildren. It is a great life.'